Fāxiǎn: A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

Chapter 1
From Cháng’ān to the Sandy Desert

1. Fāxiǎn 法显 had been living in Cháng’ān 长安. Deploiring the mutilated and imperfect state of the collection of the Books of Discipline [in the Chinese Buddhist Canon], in the second year of the period [of the warlord] Hóngshī 弘始 [399-414], being the jiān 甲辰 year of the [60-year] cycle, he entered into an engagement with [the monks] Huijìng 慧景, Dàozhēng 道整, Huiyīng 慧应, and Huìwéi 慧嵬 that they should go to India and seek for the Disciplinary Rules.

2. After starting from Cháng’ān, they passed through Lǒng 隆 [in western Shānxī 陕西 province], and came to the kingdom of Qiángguī 乾归, where they stopped for the Summer Retreat [required of Buddhist monks for extended meditation].

3. When that was over, they went forward to the kingdom of Rùtán 轫檀 [one of several usurping warrior states in the tumultuous late Jìn 晋 period], crossed the mountain of Yānglóu 养楼, and reached the emporium of Zhāngyě 张掖 [in Gānsū 甘肃 province].

4. In Zhāngyě they found the country so much disturbed that traveling on the roads was impossible for them.

5. Its king, however, was very attentive to them, kept them in his capital, and acted the part of their danapati [or patron].
6. Here they met with Zhiyán 智严, Huijīn 慧简, Sēngshào 僧绍, Bǎoyún 宝云 [the noted translator], and Sēngjǐng 僧景; and in pleasant association with them, as bound on the same journey with themselves, they passed the Summer Retreat of that year together, resuming after it their traveling, and going on to Dūnhuáng 紫煌 [in Gānsù 甘肃 province, at the end of the great wall], the chief town in the frontier territory of defence extending for about 80 lǐ from east to west, and about 40 from north to south.

7. Their company, increased as it had been, halted there for some days more than a month, after which Fǎxiàn and his four friends started first in the suite of an envoy, having separated for a time from Bǎoyún and his associates.

8. Lǐ Hào 李浩, the prefect of Dūnhuáng, had supplied them with the means of crossing the desert in front of them, in which there are many evil demons and hot winds.

9. Travelers who encounter them perish all to a man. There is not a bird to be seen in the air above, nor an animal on the ground below.

10. Though you look all round most earnestly to find where you can cross, you know not where to make your choice, the only mark and indication being the dry bones of the dead left upon the sand.
Fāxiān: A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

Chapter 2
On to Shànshàn
From Shànshàn to Yútián

1. **On to Shànshàn**
   After traveling for seventeen days, a distance we may calculate of about 1500 lǐ, the pilgrims reached the kingdom of Shànshàn 叡鄯 [probably near Lake Lop Nor at the east end of the Tarim Basin], a country rugged and hilly, with a thin and barren soil.

2. **The clothes of the common people are coarse, and like those worn in our land of Hàn 漢 [i.e., China], some wearing felt and others coarse serge or cloth of hair; this was the only difference seen among them.**

3. **The king professed our Law, and there might be in the country more than four thousand monks, who were all students of the Hinayana [= Theravada].**

4. **The common people of this and other kingdoms in that region, as well as the sramans [monks], all practise the rules of India, except that the latter do so more exactly, and the former more loosely. [A sramana (Pali: samana) is a monk who has left his family, whether or not he is a Buddhist. The Chinese transcription is shámen 沙門, which unfortunately is also the modern anthropological Chinese term for a shaman.] The travelers found the same thing in all the kingdoms through which**
they went on their way from this place westward, except that each had its own peculiar barbarous speech.

5. The monks, however, who had quit their families, were all students of Indian books and the Indian language.

6. Here they stayed for about a month, and then proceeded on their journey, fifteen days walking to the north-west bringing them to the country of Wūyì 乌夷 [unidentified].

7. In this also there were more than four thousand monks, all students of the Hinayana.

8. They were very strict in their rules, so that sramans [like Fāxiān] from the territory of Qín 秦 [i.e., China] were all unprepared for their regulations.

9. Fāxiān, through the management of Fú Gōngsūn 符公孙, the uddesika or maître d’hôtellerie, was able to remain [with his company] for more than two months, and here they were rejoined by Bǎoyùn and his friends, [whom they had left behind at Dūnhuáng].

10. **From Shànshàn to Yútián**
At the end of that time the people of Wūyì neglected the duties of propriety and righteousness, and treated the strangers in so stingy a manner that Ziyàn 智严, Huijīàn 慧简, and Huìwéi 慧傀 went back towards Gāochāng 高昌 [probably near modern Turpan or Tūlūfān 吐鲁番, southeast of Urumqi or Wūlǔmùqí 乌鲁木齐 in Xinjiang 新疆], hoping to obtain there the means of continuing their journey.

11. Fāxiān and the rest, however, through the liberality of Fú Gōngsūn, managed to go straight forward in a southwest direction. They found the country uninhabited as they went along.

12. The difficulties which they encountered in crossing the streams and on their route, and the sufferings which they endured, were unparalleled in human experience. But in the course of a month and five days they succeeded in reaching Yútián 于阗 (or Khoten) [probably near modern Hétián 和田 or Yútián 于田 on the southwestern edge of the Gobi Desert].
Fāxiān: A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

Chapter 3

Yútián
Processions of Images
The King’s New Monastery

1. **Yútián**

   Yútián is a pleasant and prosperous kingdom, with a numerous and flourishing population. The inhabitants all profess our Law, and join together in its religious music for their enjoyment.

2. The monks amount to several myriads, most of whom are students of the Mahayana. They all receive their food from the common store. [See chapters 6 and 39.]

3. Throughout the country the houses of the people stand apart like separate stars, and each family has a small stupa constructed in front of its door. The smallest of these may be twenty cubits high, or rather more.

4. In the monasteries they make rooms for monks from all quarters, the use of which is given to traveling monks who may arrive, and who are provided with whatever else they require.

5. The lord of the country lodged Fāxiān and the others comfortably, and supplied their wants, in a sangharama or monastery called Gomati [“rich in cows,” Qúmódi 瞿摩帝], of the Mahayana school.
Attached to it there are three thousand monks, who are called to their meals by the sound of a bell. When they enter the refectory, their demeanour is marked by a reverent gravity, and they take their seats in regular order, all maintaining a perfect silence. No sound is heard from their alms-bowls and other utensils.

7. When any of these pure men require food, they are not allowed to call out for it, but only make signs with their hands.

8. Huijing 慧景, Dàozhēng 道整, and [a monk named] Huidá 慧达 set out in advance towards the country of Jiéchā 竭叉 [possibly Kashmir]. But Fāxiān and the others, wishing to see the procession of images, remained behind for three months.

9. **Processions of Images**
There are in this country four great monasteries, not counting the smaller ones.

10. Beginning on the first day of the fourth month, they sweep and water the streets inside the city, making a grand display in the lanes and byways.

11. Over the city gate they pitch a large tent, grandly adorned in all possible ways, in which the king and queen, with their ladies brilliantly arrayed, take up their residence for the time.

12. The monks of the Gomati monastery, being Mahayana students, and held in great reverence by the king, took precedence of all others in the procession.

13. At a distance of three or four lǐ from the city, they made a four-wheeled image car, more than thirty cubits high, which looked like the great hall of a monastery moving along.

14. The seven precious substances [gold, silver, lapis lazuli, rock crystal, rubies, diamonds or emeralds, and agate] were grandly displayed about it, with silken streamers and canopies hanging all around.

15. The chief image [of Sakyamuni himself] stood in the middle of the car, with two Bodhisattvas in attendance upon it, while
devas [Brahmanic deities] were made to follow in waiting, all brilliantly carved in gold and silver, and hanging in the air.

16. When the car was a hundred paces from the gate, the king took off his crown of state, changed his dress for a fresh suit, and with bare feet, carrying in his hands flowers and incense, and with two rows of attending followers, went out at the gate to meet the image.

17. With his head and face bowed to the ground, he did homage at its feet, and then scattered the flowers and burnt the incense. When the image was entering the gate, the queen and the brilliant ladies with her in the gallery above scattered far and wide all kinds of flowers, which floated about and fell promiscuously to the ground. In this way everything was done to promote the dignity of the occasion.

18. The carriages of the monasteries were all different, and each one had its own day for the procession. The ceremony began on the first day of the fourth month, and ended on the fourteenth, after which the king and queen returned to the palace.

19. **The King’s New Monastery**
Seven or eight li to the west of the city there is what is called the King’s New Monastery, the building of which took eighty years, and extended over three reigns.

20. It may be 250 cubits in height, rich in elegant carving and inlaid work, covered above with gold and silver, and finished throughout with a combination of all the precious substances.

21. Behind the stupa there has been built a Hall of the Buddha, of the utmost magnificence and beauty, the beams, pillars, venetianed doors, and windows being all overlaid with gold-leaf.

22. Besides this, the apartments for the monks are imposingly and elegantly decorated, beyond the power of words to express.

23. Of whatever things of highest value and preciousness the kings in the six countries on the east of the Cōng葱 ("onion") or Karakoram range of mountains are possessed, they contribute the greater portion to this monastery, using but a small portion of them themselves.
Fāxiān: A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

Chapter 40
After Two Years Fāxiān Takes Ship for China
Disastrous Passage to Java and Thence to China
Fāxiān Arrives at Shāndōng and Goes to Nánjīng
Fāxiān’s Summing Up
Conclusion or l’Envoi by Another Writer

1. After Two Years Fāxiān Takes Ship for China
   Fāxiān abode in this country two years; and, in addition [to his
   earlier acquisitions in Patna], he succeeded in getting a copy of
   the Vinaya-pitaka (Lǜzàngběn 律藏本) of the Mahisasakah
   (Mīshāsāi 弥沙塞, “Transformed Earth”) school, the Dirgha-
   agama (Éhán 阿含) and Samyukt-agama (Zá Éhán 杂阿含)
   scriptures, and also the Samyukta-sanchaya-pitaka (Zázàng 杂藏).
   All were works unknown in the land of Hán.

2. Having obtained these Sanskrit works, he took passage in a
   large merchantman, on board of which there were more than
   200 men, and to which was attached by a rope a smaller vessel,
   as a provision against damage or injury to the large one from
   the perils of the navigation.

3. With a favourable wind, they proceeded eastwards for three
   days, and then they encountered a great wind. The vessel
   sprang a leak and the water came in.

4. The merchants wished to go to the small vessel; but the men on
   board it, fearing that too many would come, cut the connecting

http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/Faashean/Faashean40e.html
rope. The merchants were greatly alarmed, feeling their risk of instant death.

5. Afraid that the vessel would fill, they took their bulky goods and threw them into the water. Fāxiān also took his pitcher and washing-basin, with some other articles, and cast them into the sea.

6. Fearing that the merchants would cast overboard his books and images, he could only think with all his heart of the bodhisattva Guānshìyīn 觀世音, and commit his life to the protection of the church of the land of Hàn, saying in effect:

7. "I have traveled far in search of our Law. Let me, by your dread and supernatural power, return from my wanderings, and reach my resting-place!"

8. In this way the tempest continued day and night, till on the thirteenth day the ship was carried to the side of an island, where, on the ebbing of the tide, the place of the leak was discovered, and it was stopped, on which the voyage was resumed.

9. On the sea hereabouts there are many pirates, to meet with whom is speedy death.

10. **Disastrous Passage to Java and Thence to China**

   The great ocean spreads out, a boundless expanse. There is no knowing east or west; only by observing the sun, moon, and stars was it possible to go forward. If the weather were dark and rainy, the ship went as she was carried by the wind, without any definite course.

11. In the darkness of the night, only the great waves were to be seen, breaking on one another, and emitting a brightness like that of fire, with huge turtles and other monsters of the deep all about.

12. The merchants were full of terror, not knowing where they were going. The sea was deep and bottomless, and there was no place where they could drop anchor and stop.
But when the sky became clear, they could tell east and west, and the ship again went forward in the right direction. If she had come on any hidden rock, there would have been no way of escape.

14. After proceeding in this way for rather more than ninety days, they arrived at a country called Java-dvipa (Yépótí 耶婆提), where various forms of error and Brahmanism are flourishing, while Buddhism in it is not worth speaking of.

15. After staying there for five months, Fāxiān again embarked in another large merchant vessel, which also had on board more than 200 men. They carried provisions for fifty days, and commenced the voyage on the sixteenth day of the fourth month.

16. Fāxiān kept his Retreat on board the ship. They took a course to the northeast, intending to reach Guāngzhōu. After more than a month, when the night-drum had sounded the second watch, they encountered a black wind and tempestuous rain, which threw the merchants and passengers into consternation.

17. Fāxiān again with all his heart directed his thoughts to Guānshíyīn and the monkish communities of the land of Hàn; and, through their dread and mysterious protection, was preserved to daybreak.

18. After daybreak, the Brahmans deliberated together and said, “It is having this sramana on board which has occasioned our misfortune and brought us this great and bitter suffering. Let us land the bhikshu and place him on some island-shore. We must not for the sake of one man allow ourselves to be exposed to such imminent peril.”

19. A patron of Fāxiān, however, said to them, “If you land the bhikshu, you must at the same time land me; and if you do not, then you must kill me.

20. If you land this sramana, when I get to the land of Hàn, I will go to the king, and inform against you. The king also reveres and believes the Law of the Buddha, and honours the bhikshus.”

21.
The merchants hereupon were perplexed, and did not dare immediately to land Fāxiǎn.

22. At this time the sky continued very dark and gloomy, and the sailing-masters looked at one another and made mistakes. More than seventy days passed [from their leaving Java], and the provisions and water were nearly exhausted.

23. They used the salt water of the sea for cooking, and carefully divided the fresh water, each man getting two pints. Soon the whole was nearly gone, and the merchants took counsel and said,

24. "At the ordinary rate of sailing we ought to have reached Guǎngzhōu 广州, and now the time is passed by many days; must we not have held a wrong course?"

25. Fāxiǎn Arrives at Shāndōng and Goes to Nánjīng Immediately they directed the ship to the northwest, looking out for land; and after sailing day and night for twelve days, they reached the shore on the south of mount Lǎo 牢 [now written 嶯], on the borders of the prefecture of Chǎngguǎng 长广 [modern Qīngdāo 青岛 in Shāndōng 山东 [province] and immediately got good water and vegetables. [A glance at the map will show that the travelers were nearly 1400 miles off course. DKJ]

26. They had passed through many perils and hardships, and had been in a state of anxious apprehension for many days together; and now suddenly arriving at this shore, and seeing those well-known vegetables, the lǐ 莼 ["lambs-quarters," a kind of edible green] and huò 薤 [a kind of hyssop used in medicine], they knew indeed that it was the land of Hàn.

27. Not seeing, however, any inhabitants nor any traces of them, they did not know whereabouts they were. Some said that they had not yet got to Guǎngzhōu, and others that they had passed it. Unable to come to a definite conclusion, some of them got into a small boat and entered a creek, to look for some one of whom they might ask what the place was.

28. They found two hunters, whom they brought back with them, and then called on Fāxiǎn to act as interpreter and question
them. Fāxiān first spoke reassuringly to them, and then slowly and distinctly asked them, “Who are you?”

29. They replied, “We are disciples of the Buddha.” He then asked, “What are you looking for among these hills?” They began to lie [because true Buddhists would be vegetarians, not hunters], and the said, “Tomorrow is the fifteenth day of the seventh month. We wanted to get some peaches to sacrifice (là 腊) to the Buddha.” [But true Buddhists would not use this term].

30. He asked further, “What country is this?” They replied, “This is the border of the prefecture of Chángguāng 长广, a part of Qīngzhōu 青州 under the ruling House of Jin 晉.”

31. When they heard this, the merchants were glad, immediately asked for a portion of their money and goods, and sent men to Chángguāng city.

32. The prefect Lǐ Yí 李嶷 was a reverent believer in the Law of the Buddha. When he heard that a sramana had arrived in a ship from across the sea, bringing with him books and images, he immediately came to the seashore with an escort to meet the traveler, and receive the books and images, and took them back with him to the seat of his government.

33. On this the merchants went back in the direction of Yángzhōu 扬州 [possibly in Jiāngsū 江苏 province] but when Fāxiān arrived at Qīngzhōu, the prefect there begged him to remain with him for a winter and a summer. After the Summer Retreat was ended, Fāxiān, having been separated for a long time from his fellow masters, wished to hurry to Cháng’ān.

34. But the business which he had in hand was important, so he went south to the capital [probably Nánjīng 南京 by this time]; and at an interview with the masters there exhibited the Sutras and the collection of the Vinaya which he had procured.

35. Fāxiān’s Summing Up
After Fāxiān set out from Cháng’ān, it took him six years to reach Central India. His stop there extended over another six years. And on his return it took him three years to reach Qīngzhōu.
36. The countries through which he passed were a few under thirty. From the sandy desert westwards on to India, the beauty of the dignified demeanour of the monkhood and of the transforming influence of the Law was beyond the power of language fully to describe.

37. Reflecting how our masters had not heard any complete account of them, he therefore went on without regarding his own poor life, or [the dangers to be encountered on] the sea upon his return, thus incurring hardships and difficulties in a double form.

38. He was fortunate enough, through the dread power of the three Honoured Ones, to receive help and protection in his perils; and therefore he wrote out an account of his experiences, that worthy readers might share with him in what he had heard and said.

39. Conclusion or l'Envoi by Another Writer
It was in the jiāyín 甲寅 year [AD 414], the twelfth year of the Yìxī 义熙 period [AD416] of the Eastern Jìn 晋 dynasty, the year-star being in Virgo-Libra, in the summer, at the close of the period of Retreat, that I met the devotee Fāxiān. [In addition to the conflict between these two dates, if we count through the text, Fāxiān would have arrived in Qīngzhōu in 413.]

40. On his arrival I lodged him with myself in the winter study, and there, in our meetings for conversation, I asked him again and again about his travels.

41. The man was modest and complaisant, and answered readily according to the truth. I thereupon advised him to enter into details where he had at first only given a summary, and he proceeded to relate all things in order from the beginning to the end.

42. He said himself, “When I look back on what I have gone through, my heart is involuntarily moved, and the perspiration flows forth. That I encountered danger and trod the most perilous places, without thinking of or sparing myself, was because I had a definite aim, and thought of nothing but to do my best in my simplicity and straightforwardness.
Thus it was that I exposed my life where death seemed inevitable, if I might accomplish but a ten-thousandth part of what I hoped.”

44. These words affected me in turn, and I thought: “This man is one of those who have seldom been seen from ancient times to the present.

45. Since the Great Doctrine flowed on to the East there has been no one to be compared with Fāxiān in his forgetfulness of self and search for the Law.

46. Henceforth I know that the influence of sincerity finds no obstacle, however great, which it does not overcome, and that force of will does not fail to accomplish whatever service it undertakes.

47. Does not the accomplishing of such service arise from disregarding what is generally considered as important, and attaching importance to what is generally forgotten?